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ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings from a qualitative study of the nature of teachers' connections with their African American students. It is based on three rounds of interviews with six African American women teachers who had used the social justice curriculum "Facing History and Ourselves." The teachers ranged in age from the mid-twenties to the mid-fifties, and had between 2 and 23 years of classroom teaching experience. All had taught in urban junior and senior high schools, and three were currently employed as teacher educators. The most striking aspect of their self-concepts as teachers was the way in which they brought maternal urgency to teaching. They compared teaching to parenting and saw themselves in a maternal role. They did not consider their gender a liability, but saw it as a touchstone for their insights as educators. Their pedagogy was also derived from their political attitudes and their recognition that there are relationships between schools and society that differentially structure the successes and failures of groups of children. The maternal interest the women had in their students and the political understandings they had of society were supported by their visions of moral justice and their beliefs that social justice is a matter of students coming to have the choice to determine and realize their potentials for themselves. In their pedagogy, these teachers did not distinguish among maternal, political, and moral aspects of teaching. Nor did they shy away from issues of race and gender in their lives or those of their students. (Contains 11 references.) (SLD)

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I teach you the way I see us: Concepts of self and teaching of African-American women teachers committed to social justice

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I teach you the way I see us: Concepts of self and teaching of African-American women teachers committed to social justice

In recent years, researchers have sought to identify and understand the kinds of teaching practices that contribute to the success of African-American students, one of many groups traditionally underserved by formal education. In particular, the field of culturally relevant teaching has highlighted the importance of not only teachers' actions, but the philosophies that guide how teachers see and interact with their students (e.g., Delpit, 1986; 1988; Henry, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1994; McElroy-Johnson, 1993). The burgeoning literature on culturally relevant teaching has maintained that successful teachers of Black children establish personal, and not simply professional, relationships with their students that care for their social, psychological, cultural, and academic well-being, both in school and in society. Although descriptions of the personal investment that culturally relevant teachers have in their students have been an important contribution to the field of education, this literature does not clarify how and why some teachers become interested in conceptualizing and encouraging such relationships with their students.

This paper reports findings from an qualitative study undertaken to explore the nature of teachers' connection with their African-

American students (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1997). It is based on three rounds of individual interviews with six African-American women teachers who had used the social justice curriculum Facing History and Ourselves (FHAO) created by the educational and teacher training organization of the same name.

The teachers ranged in age from mid-twenties to mid-fifties, and had between two and 23 years experience of classroom teaching. All the women had taught in culturally diverse urban schools at the junior high and senior high school level, and three are currently employed by FHAO as teacher educators. In terms of their political views, each recognized the existence of systemic injustice, and saw her teaching as a key way of fostering social justice in the form of a multiracial democracy. Of the six teachers, five had become teachers after considering careers in law, business, nursing, and community activism. Only one had entered teaching as a first career choice.

The purpose of this paper is twofold – one, to contribute to our understanding of the philosophical beliefs espoused by teachers concerned with social inequity; and two, to provide insight into the origins and development of these teachers' views. In this paper, I argue that the commitments to social justice espoused by the teachers result from their bringing of three overlapping beliefs to their teaching: maternal concern for their students; a political understanding of racism; and a moral vision of our fundamental interdependence. I also maintain that these beliefs draw from the

teachers' race-conscious and gender-conscious self-concepts as Black women.

A maternal concern for students

Perhaps most poignant in the transcripts was the way in which the teachers insisted on bringing a maternal urgency to their teaching. The women compared teaching to parenting; described themselves as "a stern mother" in the classroom; and modeled their teaching on the practice of female teachers they had had as students. Natalie, a history teacher, describes the observations that led her to leave hospital management and enter teaching.

> You hear the things on TV; the media is very powerful. And you hear these things [about Black children being out of control and unteachable]. But I also have two children, who have been in private and public school, and I was thinking, "Well if people feel this way about other children, how do they feel about my children?"....
>
> I work in a junior high school, and children, even though they're going through this adolescent [phase] ... they still need to be nurtured. And I feel like also, because I am very nurturing as a mother, I thought as a teacher, I would also be very nurturing.... Like I say, I have two children and I want my children to be treated equally, fairly. And I want all other children to be taught and treated that way. So I just felt I have something to offer.

That the teachers of this study see their students as "my kids" and "our children" reflects their sense of collective responsibility to be "mothers" to those children. They frame education not simply as the provision of information, but, more importantly, as "the love and the passion that you give someone." Referring to their adolescent students as "children," these teachers' refuse to allow common

assessments of African-American teenagers as indifferent and not academically inclined to keep them from providing the nurturing that they believe is critical for learning to occur.

Part of their passion and love for their students comes from the fact that the teachers firmly believe that their "children" are filled with promise, and that they represent the future of society. "They can be great achievers. It's so much in them, you know, but it takes a skillful teacher, it takes a skillful woman, to draw it out." Consequently, the teachers place the responsibility for their students' academic and social success squarely on their shoulders. As one describes, "What happens to those children [for the nine months that they're in your classroom] is what you do with them. And you've got a precious life there."

A key reason for embracing a maternal concern for their students may lie in that the teachers do not consider their gender as a liability, but a touchstone for their insights as educators. In positive and affirming ways, they all discussed the existence and influence of mothers, grandmothers, and female teachers in their lives. These role models each found ways to nurture their development and the development of children considered "other" by a racist society. For example, as Andrea, a 57 year old art teacher who grew up in a racially hostile New England city explains,

> Well, my grandmother on my mother's side, left the South for obvious reasons. But came here when she was 18.... She came by herself, didn't know a soul. It was, 'I am not staying in the south.'.... And she was a very, 'you don't sit still' person.... [My] great-grandmother was feisty. And her thing was, ... she was a

> slave, but hard work never killed anyone. It all had to do with how you feel, how you think about yourself.... This was someone who, if you have something to do, you do it.

These women encouraged the children in Andrea's family to "name themselves" or to resist notions of inferiority. In a similar way, Patricia, an English teacher in her early forties, recalls that she learned the importance of asserting an affirming concept of self from the women in her southern segregated community: "The way we thought, is that a weak Black woman? Wasn't no place for her; she dies early (chuckle). I mean, being a Black woman, you were the lowest. I mean, you know, the Black man had authority over you, the White woman had authority over you, the White man had authority over you, so I mean, you had to be strong."

Natalie, another teacher raised in segregated South, defines strength as being like "a Harriet Tubman or an Angela Davis.... They're bold. Very bold. I think that's what living is about -- taking chances ... believing in a cause and taking it to its fullest extension." Michelle, a history educator in her late 20s, found an example of boldness in her own mother.

> [W]hen I was about 12, that I was feeling very strongly that ... I should have been born 20 years earlier, in my mother's decade because all of the stories that she told me about growing up during the 50s and getting involved in the Civil Rights movement, that's where I wanted to be.... I mean, it seemed very glorious then.... Because these people had made a difference.

As these excerpts demonstrate, for the teachers of this study, a sense of self as mother in the classroom is a powerful way of embodying and continuing a tradition of women who involved

themselves in both home-based and community-based efforts to improve their lives and the lives of their children.

Like the Black women of Kathleen Casey's (1990) research with socially progressive educators, the teachers of my study do not approach their work with a desire to "deconstruct the maternal." That is, they do not see that their concept of women and the maternal implicate them in the patriarchal structure of schools. Rather, they believe that their caring for all children, and Black children in particular, is a key manifestation of their resistance to the racism of schools.

A political understanding of racism

Teaching for these teachers, however, is not only about their maternal concern for their students overall well-being. Their pedagogy also derives from their "political clarity" or their recognition that there are relationships between schools and society which differentially structure the successes and failures of groups of children (Bartolome, 1994). The work of anti-racism educators maintains that for educators to think of themselves as "simply transmitters of existing configurations of knowledge" is inaccurate and irresponsible to the students they teach (Giroux, 1994, p. 300; see also Sleeter, 1993). Instead, teachers need to recognize that in their roles, they have the power to legitimize certain knowledges and identities and not others.

Operating as "gate openers" rather than "gate keepers" (Koerner & Hulsebosch, 1995) in their schools, the teachers of my study seek to make sure that their African-American students are given the opportunities that are routinely shared with other children. As Andrea, the art teacher, describes,

> It continues to happen [that Black students are ignored]. [Another Black teacher] and I, we fight against that, to this day, you know. We have to work to kind of maneuver and guide, open up the little doors here and there for ours. "Here, read this. Take advantage of this," you know. They get looked over. It happens, and sometimes consciously, and sometimes unconsciously. We have to be our own advocates. Advocate for each other, and for the best for our children.

It is in defining themselves as political beings, as people who bring their knowledge of injustice squarely into the classroom, that the teachers most claim a minority voice in education. Combined with their maternal concern, their political clarity allows them to see disturbing similarities between academic tracking and social segregation; between teachers' low-expectations of some students and the perpetuation of an underclass; between teacher control and the maintenance of a social order in which too few people question those in power. They essentially develop a "double consciousness" (DuBois, 1965/1903) or a questioning attitude about the "truths" proclaimed and uncritically accepted by the mainstream. Referring to the negative stereotypes of Black children so prevalent in the media and in society, Cynthia explains,

> You've got to start with a base level of understanding these kids as human beings. We're all subject to the stereotypes of our society, and we can't assume that because we're well intended [that] we don't carry with us all of that. You know that sheltering, 'Don't teach them that history.' Or, 'Don't tell them that.' Or, 'I feel so sorry for you. I expect you to be poor. I know you only have one parent. Your mother probably doesn't know how to be a mother' [all said in gentle, condescending voice]. Hey, you've got to help them see within their own situation the strength and the richness.

The political understandings of racism that the teachers have come from their having lived the contradiction of the U.S.: They know that racism and other systems of oppression have a long history in the first modern democracy. Patricia recalls the politically charged atmosphere of her Black segregated school:

> But everyday, it seems like even from first grade, it was like you have to deal with the White world. That was the whole consciousness. You're learning to read, so you could deal with the White world. You're learning your arithmetic, you're learning how to socialize, you're learning not to fight with Blacks, everything you're learning so you could deal with the White world. And it was just drummed, drummed, drummed, drummed, drummed.

Although only two of the teachers grew up in the segregated South, all six had experienced it – either by spending time in the South; or by listening to the stories of family members who had left it. These experiences helped illuminate the racist nature of U.S. society, and it is within this political context that the teachers remember being exhorted to excel in school. Michelle demonstrates her awareness of political reality by describing herself as having grown up in the "post-Civil Rights, post-Vietnam era," which meant that she could matriculate at a college in the South that would have rejected her mother's application just twenty years before.

> [T]here was this sense that, sort of like, "The way has been paved, and you have all of these opportunities now, but don't forget your obligations. And your obligation is – and this was drilled into me from a very young age – your obligation is to make something of yourself, to continue the struggle, to continue the pride. To make sure that your life is something that your family, your community, your people can be proud of.

The existence of this struggle, however, is not commonly acknowledged in integrated school settings, where the assumption is that the curriculum represents a common history or that it speaks about only those histories that merit attention and offer insight. Cynthia speaks to this reality in her description a graduate class in education that she took.

> [W]e were supposed to write ... our families' history, educational history. And I started out saying, you know, "How on earth do I chart the process by which my family acquired knowledge?" I mean, there're two strands. It's the formal education. Then it's the 'other stuff,' and to narrate one would do our journey an injustice. It would be clearly insufficient. To list the degrees and the colleges attended is half of it, but the other part of education is becoming literate in your surroundings. Learning the rules, learning the conduct, and that's about my grandfather working as a White man, because he learned the rules.

As political beings, the teachers consciously engage their students to see the validity of their perspectives, even why they're not represented in standard texts. In many ways, they bring their own frustrations with the schooling they received to their teaching. They strive to help students become literate in the "culture of power" (Delpit, 1988) of schools and mainstream society, while recognizing its limitations and oversights.

A moral vision of our fundamental interdependence

The maternal interest that the teachers have in their students and the political understandings that they have of society are supported by their moral vision of social justice. Specifically, the teachers believe that social justice is a matter of students coming to have the choice to determine and realize their potential for themselves. A repeated sentiment among the teachers is that their job is to facilitate the growth of their students: "I think of myself as, 'When they leave me, they're going on to be whatever they're deemed to be, and part of my job is to help them discover what that is.' " In Michelle's words,

> I believe that we're not here by accident. That there is a reason for us to be here.... I truly believe I have a call ... and it was to teach. That it's not just that this was a career goal. There were a lot of things that influenced it, but I truly believe that I am a teacher, and that I taught in the classroom because this is what I'm supposed to be doing. And this is who I am.... This was my particular call, to work with children, to make a difference in their lives.

The teachers speak of wanting to "manifest the divinity within" them, to "develop a kindness and a love and a patience .... A level of understanding, of humility, of groundedness, of goodness." To them, teaching is not about grading papers, but about "helping someone to be better in the world" and "discovering why I'm here [in the world]." Moreover, they feel that this moral dimension of developing the self in order to make a positive contribution to humanity has always been a part of teaching. In the words of Sylvia, a special education teacher, "I don't understand how you can think about teaching and not think

about your moral responsibility for children. And your responsibility to help them grow, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.... I think [teaching] has become more complex ... especially in urban settings, but I think that was always the role of educators.

It appears that from their experiences as African-American women, these teachers have developed an understanding of our fundamental interdependence. As teachers, they care for all their students, but Black children in particular, because they know that there is often the distinction made by educators and policy makers between "our children" and "other people's children" (Delpit, 1988). Caring for African-American students is a way of insisting on a view of society in which racism and other systems of oppression no longer place certain groups of children at the margins. For reasons that they are still discovering, they have the firm belief that they have been led by events and circumstances of their lives to become teachers and to use their role to help improve the world for themselves and others. The role models and life experiences they use to explain their commitments all illustrate the value of taking an active role in the struggles for justice.

Conclusion

In their pedagogy, the teachers do not consciously distinguish between the maternal, political, and moral aspects of their teaching. The distinctions represent my attempt to understand how and why these six women construe their teaching as an act of social justice. In their minds, the teachers are simply bringing a large part, if

not all, of who they are and who they wish to become to their teaching.

As I explored in this paper, the commitment to social justice held by Black women consists of maternal, political, and moral concerns that they bring to their teaching. What is interesting about their pedagogy is that it draws from the teachers' experience of affirming interpersonal relationships (the maternal); their political awareness; and their moral convictions. In large part, these teachers see their work as continuing the efforts of other Black women to survive the adverse conditions created by racism. In their interviews, they view their efforts as part of a larger tradition embodied by family and community members, as well as by historical figures. They also see their teaching as helping them become whole people – individuals who come to their teaching not disconnected from their knowledge of relationships, power, or the human capacity for change and good.

The contribution of this research is that it suggests that these teachers have created understandings of self that do not shy away from the significance of race and gender in their lives. In fact, it is in acknowledging themselves as raced and gendered persons that these teachers locate much of their strength, knowledge, and commitment. The experiences and stories they draw from center around people who understood and resisted their marginalization. The role models they mention offer what one teacher calls "my voice to the textbooks that I'm not written in."

Significantly, the teachers generally do not credit their teacher education or their schooling with providing them with the knowledge of children and society and the passion for social justice that are at the heart of their pedagogy. Their experiences suggest that teachers who are successful with and committed to African-American students are those who creatively draw upon the examples of people who are committed to engaging in personal and social change; in learning from the people they encounter; and in resisting social imperatives not to care.

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